

**Oral History and Disability:
Developing Sources and Tweaking Theory**

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This issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* deals with oral history as a methodology that scholars use to record and theorize about past disability experiences. Social history, using this methodology, developed in the late 1960s in the wake of the black civil rights movement as a radically democratizing approach to a field that for centuries had been focused primarily on the powerful, the rich, the important, the well educated and the famous. One reason for this focus was caused by the availability of historical sources. Well-to-do individuals often left a wealth of sources for historians to study while most ordinary and poor people did not. Oral history as a methodology has made it possible for historians to learn about the experiences of people at the bottom and the margins of society, the powerless, the less educated, the poor and the stigmatized. What oral history can offer to the field of disability studies has only begun to be realized. People with all kinds of disabilities can get a chance to tell their life story and add their voice to the telling of History.

In the first article included below, Susan O'Hara describes the process of building an archive of oral histories documenting the early phases of the Independent Living and Disability Rights movement in the United States of America, especially from the perspective of how this happened in Berkeley, California. The second article, by David Gerber, presents a more theoretical discussion of issues confronting historians. Gerber is using oral narratives to account for both the collective history of an organization and the life stories of individual veterans who became blind during World War II. Although these two articles are quite different in approach and targeted audience, they both serve as indications of what is happening in the embryonic field of oral history and disability.

O'Hara outlines in practical detail a project funded by the National Institute of Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). This project, described as "A Documentation Project and Research Platform," will provide a crucial collection of resources for scholars whose work involves an understanding of the genesis of the disability movement. Oral history interviews allow people with disabilities to participate directly in the production of primary historical sources. It is of critical importance for our movement that we develop source materials such as these. As the early leaders of the disability movement grow older and pass away, some of the richness and complexity of our movement's early history is at risk of being lost.

While oral history interviews are well suited for giving voice to groups whose experiences have not been included in past historical accounts, the stories told must be understood as both memories and facts. Some mainstream historians still have reservations about using oral history as a research methodology.

In a large open forum at the American Historical Association's Annual meeting in Oakland, 1998, a panelist historian expressed the view that oral history was a fad that probably would die out because, being based on people's memory, it was not reliable. Not one person objected. However, the increasing respect given to oral history within the profession is clearly expressed in the fact that the *Journal of American History* now annually devotes a section of one of its issues to oral history articles.

The problem that many historians have with oral history has to do with some of the issues

Gerber is raising in his essay, "Memory of Enlightenment: Accounting for Egalitarian Politics of the Blinded Veterans Association." Oral histories do not provide just straightforward "unmediated truth." When people recount their life experiences, they always interpret and give meaning to the stories they tell. The presentation of this meaning might be better served by details that differ from what happened, and therefore some, indeed at times key elements of the story might shift and change. Thus memories are "unreliable." The human mind does not simply register, record, and retrieve what happens.

Memories frequently serve other purposes that historians must identify and take into account. As Gerber shows in his article, memories can be used as resources to learn about large, complex issues that usually are more important to the storyteller(s) than the specific items that were lost or changed.

Many social historians have studied this process of how memory functions for a large community and individuals within it. This work is extremely relevant to the development of disability history. For example, Alessandro Portelli describes individual and communal shifts in the retelling of events in his book, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*. "[A] 21-year-old steel worker from Terni, an industrial town in Umbria, central Italy, died in a clash with police on 17 March 1949. . . ." When the official published record of the events that happened changes in the memory of most community members, Portelli explains it as a function of memory used strategically to deal with community distress associated with large employment shifts that happened over a long period of time. The communal memory of the specific events that took place within the span of half an hour, shifted to another year and took on a variety of dramatic details. Instead of merely dismissing these individual and communal memories as incorrect, contradicted by newspaper accounts, for example, Portelli finds that they express other larger truths that are important to the whole community.

Although he does not refer to Portelli's work, Gerber draws similar conclusions. Like Portelli's view that memory "manipulates factual details and chronological sequence" because the remembered events need to acquire value as symbols; they need to be useful in the psychological process of restoring self-esteem. Gerber argues that the blind veterans have changed the story they tell about the origins of the anti-racist politics of the BVA (Blind Veterans Association) because they are "expressing what is for [them] a larger, symbolic truth about their experience of confronting and coping with blindness."

The respect for the ordinary human mind inherent in this view of memory as history, is truly empowering. According to Portelli "[t]he discrepancy between fact and memory ultimately enhances the value of the oral sources as historical documents." This perspective needs to be extended to the memories of people with disabilities. When the stories of people with disabilities differ from the recollections of other players in the situations narrated, this discrepancy tends to be treated as incompetence or self-deception on the part of the disabled narrators. Is it possible for historians in general to come to appreciate the memories of people with disabilities as valuable "historical documents"? Only if the history they write includes the perspectives of people with disabilities. Only if the privileged able-bodied view of history is problematized as "ableism" and becomes a specific frame of reference rather than an unquestioned point of view.

A sophisticated theoretical perspective on memory as history has been developed using examples mainly from working class settings. This theoretical approach can be applied to a host of other social and cultural contexts, including individual and communal disability experiences. Studies in disability oral history, such as the essay by David Gerber in this issue, also has the potential to raise new questions and thus contribute to our understanding of memory as history.

Mainstream historians who dismiss oral history as a fad may not have discovered the sophisticated theoretical work that is now being done in this field. Oral history interviews can easily be abused and give the impression of allowing a new group the chance to be heard while still providing support to the old master narrative of the dominant group. This is how historian Jerrold Hirsch explains the use of oral history interviews in the documentary, "A Paralyzing Fear: The History of

Polio." The dominant medical perspective on disability is not challenged by the oral testimonies of the adult polio survivors in that film.

Even when the narrators are people with disabilities and they are talking about their own experiences and memories, oral history interviews do not automatically lead to a new understanding of the events. Historians and film makers alike need to be cognizant of the theoretical assumptions that underlie their thinking and shape their work. Since the ableist position is so easily taken for granted, the task of sorting out what it takes to "de-center" ableism, would contribute to both a new understanding of history and a new theoretical approach.

Disability history as a new field cannot succeed unless the work we do is held to high academic standards. Oral history interviews provide us with a great opportunity to add the disability perspective. There is, however, much serious work to be done in those periods of the past that cannot be reached through the memories of the living. "A Little History Worth Knowing" is a short film that amply demonstrates the need for serious work in disability history. What little "information" we have about disability issues in the past is often unexamined and passed along without much thought.

I want to thank the contributors to this issue. Oral history is a great tool for us as we begin to examine our participation in the past, record our perspective on the present, and create documents for current and future historians that include disability experiences. As social historians discover how oral narratives from people with disabilities can help develop theoretical perspectives as well as bring a deeper understanding of the complexities of life, disability history will gain its place alongside the historical work on gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation.

Reference

Portelli, A. (1991). *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.